

Speech at the Working Table III meeting in Sofia on 17 May 2005
By Henny J. van der Graaf, Co-chair Defence Conversion Task Force.

Thank you for offering the opportunity to highlight what Working Table III of the Stability Pact is doing concerning defence conversion and how we cooperate with NATO and other actors in this field. Dr. Busek stressed in his speech to the Bucharest Defence Ministerial meeting on 31 March that he considered defence conversion as a core activity of the Stability Pact, which finds its expression in the NATO/Stability Pact Task Force co- chaired by NATO, and the Stability Pact.

We have already heard this morning that at the ministerial meeting it was decided among others to establish three working groups within the RACVIAC organization.

You have heard from Frederique Jacquemin that the defence conversion process in the SEE region is mainly facilitated by NATO as the Task Force leader of the Stability Pact's Initiative on Defence Conversion, focusing with two NATO teams on the monitoring of programmes concerning the retaining and resettlement of redundant military personnel and the conversion of military sites and installations.

The Stability Pact is supporting NATO and countries in the region with the identification of assistance needs and collecting information on defence conversion issues in the future mainly through RACVIAC as the centre for defense conversion. The general idea is that the Stability Pact prepares the ground for NATO and other actors for the execution of bilateral assistance and support. A number of other international actors are also active in the field of defence conversion such as UNDP, IOM, OSCE, World Bank.

UNDP is in a number of countries involved in resettlement programmes and destruction of weapons and ammunitions; OSCE is in particular in BiH active. IOM is assisting several countries with resettlement while the Worldbank is providing financial support for some demobilization and reintegration programmes in the region. (BiH and Romania) Here too, I see a facilitating role for the Stability Pact, in particular in the field of coordination.

DCAF, a Geneva based NGO, has since 2002 a working group on demobilization and reintegration operational in the region and provides analytical assessment studies to national program managers and international donors.

The Bonn International Centre for Conversion (BICC) is also a main player in the field of defence conversion and has produced a number of very useful studies on the topic.

A number of international donors is also providing bilateral financial assistance and in some cases expert support.

A problem is that these activities often lack coordination leading sometimes to ad-hoc approaches and a lack of coherence.

Therefore, the Stability Pact is also prepared to make an effort to create more coherence in foreign technical and financial assistance for defence conversion projects and programmes. It has facilitated the Defence Ministerial conference of last March in Bucharest and is facilitating the establishment of a defence conversion cell in RACVIAC

In principle, no new structures should be established but a more integrated approach of the existing initiatives should be realized.

We have just heard from general Papatitis how he sees RACVIAC as future clearinghouse for defence conversion and that pending formal agreement of the MAG in July, the three working groups will be organized. The main purpose of these "working groups" is to bring regularly experts from the region together to exchange experiences and 'lessons learned' with defence conversion in their countries. These working groups could also be used to provide information to the NATO expert groups and other bilateral actors and to other foreign advisory bodies on defense conversion such as the DCAF working group on retraining redundant military personnel.

To create synergy between these working groups and international institutes like DCAF and BICC, we would like to suggest that BICC would in principle be involved in the working group on base conversion and DCAF be involved in the working group on retraining/resettlement. If DCAF agrees, merging of the existing DCAF working group on retraining with the future RACVIAC working group on retraining could be an option.

We have noticed with satisfaction that NATO is prepared to be involved in the working group on base conversion. There would not seem to be any duplication with the existing NATO Expert Team on base conversion, as this works on a bilateral basis with the countries of the region, whereas the RACVIAC working group would have a more regional approach.

The third working group on downsizing and/or restructuring military industries for civilian use could be built on existing experience of other countries such as in some of the Visegrad countries or some other countries in Europe.

Because strong links exist between the subjects covered by the respective working groups in particular regarding redundant personnel close cooperation is needed between the working groups. RACVIAC could also perform this role by reporting back to the other working groups.

Let me say some words about the questionnaire. Countries are asked to answer the questionnaire preferably before the meeting of the MAG in July. The questionnaire should not only be used for a preliminary exchange of information between the countries in the region but also be a lasting mechanism for supporting international and bilateral conversion assistance and fact-finding.

I would like to inform you that, upon request, a RACVIAC/Stability Pact team will be ready to visit countries in the region to discuss which practical steps are planned and needed to give effect and expression to the Ministerial Declaration on Defence Conversion and to discuss in more detail the possible use of the questionnaire.

To facilitate contacts I would like to ask the countries in the region to inform RACVIAC and the Stability Pact in due course about a defence conversion focal point in

their country.

An issue not dealt with in the three planned working groups is the problem of redundant ammunition and explosives.

As indicated by dr. Busek during his speech at the ministerial conference on Defence Conversion in Bucharest, and Janez Premoze this morning, we will start discussions with SEESAC, the South Eastern Clearinghouse for Small Arms and Light weapons, about a possible enhanced role regarding technical and expert support for the destruction of redundant weapons and ammunitions,

At present, SEESAC is, among others, concerned with safe storage and destruction of ammunition for small arms and light weapons. However, safe storage and disposal of ammunition are much the same for a wide range of redundant conventional ammunitions for major weapon systems such as tanks, heavy mortars and artillery.

A problem to tackle this problem is that the development of adequate international assistance and action plans in this field is hampered by a lack of official information concerning redundant ammunition stocks. There is little information about the size of the enormous stocks of redundant ammunition, which often are well beyond their shelf life and as such could pose a substantial physical risk to the population.

A regional clearinghouse for the full range of ammunition/explosives disposal might be something to consider.

Now the stage has been set for a regional approach at the MoD Conference it is important to keep the momentum of this process and turn proposals into concrete action on the ground. We are fully prepared to continue to facilitate this process.